

American Literature.

Literature multiplies the sources of ~~enjoyment~~, and enlarges the capacities of intellectual enjoyment. It is regarded as the most infallible criterion of the progress of intelligence and civilization. When the manners of men become refined, and a taste for the luxurious recreations of the barbarian declines, no amusement occupies so usefully and so delightfully the vacant hours of life - no pleasure so little exhausts the materials and faculties of enjoyment - and no taste by indulgence seeks objects more numerous or emotions more exquisite.

The legitimate object of literature is the improvement of the mind, not by extending its acquisition, but by enlarging its faculties and resources.

It is the business of science to range in the field of discovery and invention - to investigate laws and establish principles; but it is the business of literature to render intellectual habits sound and vigorous, and to assist the natural expansion

sion and development of the intellectual faculties

It gives the mind a consciousness of its own elevation - charges its dominion over the objects of nature - and combines with the best feelings incident to every condition of life. It employs with advantage and pleasure the gloomy thoughts of the unfortunate and moderates the elevation of the prosperous - directs the enthusiasm of the young and brightens the decaying prospects of the aged

Literature is the instrument by which the ethical sciences are diffused. It consequently has the most important effect ^{upon the sentiment} with which they are regarded, the activity with which they are pursued and ^{the mode} in which they are cultivated

Polite letters allure the world into the region of the sciences, and readers are gradually led on from poetry and eloquence, to morals and philosophy. Literature led philosophy from the schools, enabled her to teach and to serve mankind and recalled her to experience and utility from

thorny distinctions and splendid visions.

Does our hemisphere enjoy the salutary influence of this splendid luminary? Let us for a moment indulge in the interesting enquiry, what are the causes which have contributed either to impede or accelerate the march of genius and refinement in our own country? are her moral and intellectual energies hastening to extinction or expanding into life and activity? what are the extent and merit of her attainments, and her rank and prospects in the republic of letters? Our literature has ever been watched with an envious eye by the literati of Europe. They have been incessant and copious in their effusions of malignity and calumny against our country its morals intellect and institutions. They have represented us to ^{the} world as an inferior race of intelligent beings incapable of intellectual exertion and struggling with disease and poverty and all the forbidding influences of a hostile climate and an unfruitful soil. An answer ~~can~~ ^{need} not be given to such groundless accusations & such foul and scurrilous invective.

Candour and integrity however, compel us to acknow-
 ledge the propriety of the most severe and humiliating
 criticisms. Considered as an enlightened and polished
 nation our literature has been justly exposed to censure
 and reproach. Our pretensions are indeed limi-
 ted and it would be the height of national arro-
 gance and vanity to deny our European brethren,
 a vast superiority in literary attainments.

But a review of those causes that have constantly
operated to retard our advancements in letters,
from the time of our colonial establishment to
the present period of our national existence will
greatly mitigate the accusations alleged against
our literature and remove the groundless impec-
cations of the debility of our minds.

all the discouragements that could distort the
faculties and paralyze the energies of the mind.

The early inhabitants were the persecuted
from different nations—derived from many na-
tions, they spoke many languages and the com-
pulsions of all—attached to different interests, manners
and opinions genius was chained in invincible
prejudices and exhausted in religious controversies.
In the corruption of ignorance, and the flames
of discord the muses never dwell—in the fire of
animosity, the powers of taste never unfold, and the
birth of genius never bloomed.

The provincial government that soon preceded
the revolution, was peculiarly unfavorable to the pro-
motion and encouragement of literature. The
parent country holding the reins of government
at a distance scattered among us the instruments
of oppression and despotism, and withheld the
means of improvement. Trembling at the conse-
quences of our rival greatness, the retardation of our
national and intellectual growth was a problem

which exercised the policy of the nation, and per-
plexed the wisdom of her councils.

The revolution threw a still deeper gloom
over our literary ~~prospects~~ prospects. The energies
of the scholar, the statesman, and of all were
blended in one common effort to raise from
degradation and dependence their names
and their liberties. A tide of desolation rolled
from the borders, and swept into the abyss of
ruin ~~off~~ our temples, our altars, and our homes.
The muses were driven from their seats, semin-
aries of learning were neglected - and a cold ap-
athy to the interests of literature completed
the picture of the times. In vain do we look
for a spirited devotion to letters, an refinement
in the storms of war and the vortex of revolutions.

Since that period a variety of causes have op-
erated and still operate to retard the cultivation
of literature.

The energies of the country are more direct-
ed to accumulation of wealth than the

acquisition of knowledge. The wealth is accumulated
by our laws and customs of ~~descent~~ inheritance, it is
dissipated among heirs and not left in the lan-
guage of another, to found families, sustain rank,
purchase power, or pension genius. Hence we have
none of those advantages of a learned leisure,
which are enjoyed by the literate, and no literary
corps who are authors by profession. Our
highest institutions are incompetent to afford
the instruction, and the circumstances of the
most affluent ^{are inadequate} to defray the expenses of a lit-
erary life. Our youth are scarcely permitted to
complete the preliminary forms of education
before their own resources and the exigencies of
the people pre^{vent} them upon the stage of active
service. Thus our genius is buried in the clanging
of professional practice, hilt to the ^{earth} or expended
on the ocean, and seldom rises to the heaven
in pursuit of knowledge.

Our thirst for popularity grows out of the
very nature of our government. But to gain

this, it is requisite neither to replenish the mind with classic lore, nor near the laurels of genius. To be the favourite of an ignorant multitude, a man must descend to their level, adopt their prejudices and propagate their errors.

Party spirit has poisoned the intercourse of private life, corrupted the national taste, and vitiated the style of our political writings. The fires of genius were removed from the altars of science to enkindle the rage and inflame the agitations of party.

In view of these considerations, is it strange that we have not sounded the depths of the Pæcian spring, or ranged the summit of the Parnassian mount?

Because our geniuses who have appeared on the rolls of literary fame, cannot vie with the profound and classical scholars of England, are we to conclude, that nature sparing of intellectual materials, has reared the rubbish of creation, to form American minds, or moulded them with a miserably allomence in weakness or deformity. It reflects honour upon our intellectual character, that amidst a complication of obstacles to oppose the development of the intellectual faculties, we have a name

and a being in the republic of letters. But we have more. The first political disquisitions between England and this country, the early state papers and manifestos of congress evinced ~~and~~ energy of character and a vigour of intellect almost unparalleled. The constitutions of the several states are up to date with the relative principles of law and moral science. Schools, academies and colleges are remembered by the paterfamilias and visited by the scholar. Societies embodying ~~some~~ the wisdom and learning of the nation, have been instituted to concentrate the beams of philosophy and science upon our hemisphere. Poetry history and eloquence have received to to their embraces the impassioned scholar to feel upon their charms and riot in their graces. Already do the muses breathe the fragrances of ^{our} groves and receive inspiration from our fountains.

In the poetic walk, the general appearances are rather symptomatic than decisive; the general taste is however refined and elevated. Genuine poetry has recognised amongst us some of her legitimate offspring; some which exhibit the flowers of the richest fancy, and breathe the fires of the boldest genius.

Often do we read with elevated emotions, the productions of our own poets, often do their beautiful and sublime sentiments vibrate on our recollection, and their smooth and varied melody steal on our senses.

In the department of history the Americans have done little, they have however accomplished all that could be expected from the peculiarities of their condition. For a long period the history of this country, was involved in that from which it originated. Untill recently has it invited the labours of the historian, or been worthy of the compositions of genius. Still we have histories distinguished for accuracy of compilation, beauty of style and force of description.

Our oratory has been rather an instrument of public business, than a branch of literature; still we have orators who can move by the thunders of their eloquence, and who suffer none in comparison with their transatlantic contemporaries.

But no where does literary composition reflect more honour upon American literature, than in anonymous essays and periodical publications. There are exhibited such displays of taste and genius as will yield to no literary productions of modern times. There may seen in effect the magic of the pen,

the delineations of the pencils and the shades of the brush.
There are blended the beauties and perfections of art, and
the simplicity and variety of nature.

Many have we whom remembrance consecrates as men of
genius, of letters, and of taste—many who rise high in the
etherial firmament, and shine with unborrowed rays.
They need not be named or eulogised, for already are they
embalmed in our memories and our affections.

It is difficult to assign to our literature
a specific character. No standard of taste has ever yet
been erected, and no national literature has ever yet
been formed. The fluctuating character of our literary
composition may be seen in the multitude of authors who
continually deluge us with their writings; comparatively
few of which we acknowledge exhibit much refinement
of taste, or supremacy of intellect. No where comes and at
no period does it assume a marked and permanent charac-
teristic features. Sometimes it is characterized by vigour and
originality, at others, by excessive refinement. At one time
it is rude and rough, but gigantic in its strength and
proportions and full of the wildness and grace of nature,
at another, a polished monotony and an elaborate exaltation
~~weakness~~ weaken the force of language, and circumscribe the
field of thought.

Our literary prospects have been the subject of much
injudicious and childish speculation. We are told by
newspaper editors and essayists, and every prose-cobbler
on the continent, that soon we shall rise to unequalled
eminence in letters, in arts and in arms - that soon the
productions of the American pen will march to
universal admiration and unlimited currency, fearful
of the shafts of British vengeance and the thunders
of her criticism - that shortly the American eagle
will wing its ethereal flight, and from its celestial
heights, look with a smile of pity, upon the efforts
and acquisitions of the exotic mind. But these are
in general the fanciful visions of inexperienced and
disordered minds. True we are allowed to expect
much from our local and natural advantages
and from the freedom of our institutions.
The influence of moral and physical causes
is decidedly on our favour. The human mind
is indeed acquiring liberty and strength
and many circumstances are combining

to rouse our slumbering intellect. Here is
freedom of speech and freedom of the press
a general diffusion of the comforts of
life - a general cultivation of reason, and
a widely diffused feeling of equality
and moral pride. The administration
of public law is purified by the public
eye, and a school of humanity and
justice. No impassable lines of demarcation
destine the lower classes to shame and
servitude and the higher to envy and
hatred. Neither the turbulence nor distrac-
tion of civil wars, nor the chilling influence
of despotism are stifling or perverting
our intellectual energies. But notwithstan-
ding the facilities and encouragements of
our situation, no one can forebode our
literary destinies. Great changes in national
literature are usually effected by the ope-
ration of causes which are beyond the reach

of intellectual vision and the control of human agency. Whatever depends upon enquiry, is reducible to rule or capable of demonstration, admits of progressive improvement; but that which depends on taste, genius, or feeling eludes the prophetic ken. The sciences from their history seem to have in them no principle of limitation or decay; but the universal testimony of facts forbids a transfer of the analogy to the progress of literature. Still we may expect our literary prospects to brighten when fires shall have dispersed his stores in greater profusion - when the advantages of a literary leisure could be enjoyed, and a literary curiosity be gratified.

You who frequent the seats of the muses and recline in the classic shades have every inducement to be active

in accelerating the advancement of letters
and refinement, and in defending our
genius from the thralldom of an unat-
tural and fastidious taste. You may
even live to tread free the empyrea-
heights of literature - to drink the waters
that flow from the sacred fountains
of Parnassus, and cull the flowers that
bloom upon its everlast summit.
For your encouragement you may be
allowed to indulge in the cheering and
fond anticipations that our literature
will keep pace in improvement with
the lapse of time - that it will continue
to increase in strength and magnificence
till perfection shall limit the efforts
of the mind.

Gray, unmarked box